

Decoupling shipbreaking from environmental and social hazards: a call for action

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Around 1800 ships of over 500 GT annually reach the end of their operating lives on average. Almost 95% of obsolete ships can be recycled, providing the raw materials and employment opportunities. Theoretically, recycling is the most environmentally-friendly and economically sound way for ship decommissioning. However, current practices in the management of obsolete ships are highly problematic. The majority of end-of-life ships (80% of the world's end-of-life tonnage in 2017) are dismantled mainly manually by a migrant work force on the beaches of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Due to unacceptably high levels of fatalities, injuries and work-related diseases the International Labor Organization declared shipbreaking the most dangerous job in the world. Additionally, the environment is exposed to a great number of risks due to emissions of numerous toxic materials into the air, sea and ground in the intertidal zone. In the efforts to improve ship-recycling conditions, the Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships 2009 was adopted in 2009. Although it has not yet entered into force, it has been criticized by environmental and human rights organizations. Another relevant international legal instrument, the Basel Convention, is easy to circumvent. Therefore, to reduce endangering human health and the environment there is a need to enhance public awareness and advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible shipbreaking. A review of current practices, the most frequent hazards, legal challenges and proposals for actions are provided.

Key words: shipbreaking, human health, environmental hazards